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Identity Talk of Aspirational Ethical Leaders

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Abstract This study investigates how business leaders dynamically narrate their aspirational ethical leadership identities. In doing so, it furthers understanding of ethical leadership as a process situated in time and place. The analysis focuses on the discursive strategies used to narrate identity and ethics by ethnic Chinese business leaders in Indonesia after their conversion to Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity. By exploring the use of metaphor, our study shows how these business leaders discursively deconstruct their 'old' identities and construct their 'new' aspirational identities as ethical leaders. This leads to the following contributions. First, we show that ethical leadership is constructed in identity talk as the business leaders actively narrate aspirational identities. Second, the identity narratives of the business leaders suggest that ethical leadership is a context-bound and situated claim vis-à-vis unethical practice. Third, we propose a conceptual template, identifying processes of realisation and inspiration followed by significant shifts in understanding, for the study of aspirational ethical leadership.

Keywords Aspiring ethical leadership · Identity · Narrative · Metaphor

Introduction

This paper examines how business leaders dynamically narrate their aspirational ethical leadership identities and, in doing so, incorporates an explicit identity lens into ethical leadership studies. We contend that recent theorising in organisation studies on dynamic identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003), aspirational identities (Thornborrow and Brown 2009) and temporal discontinuity of identity (Ybema 2010) combined with insights from social constructionist leadership research (Carroll and Levy 2010; Cunliffe 2009; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Fairhurst 2009; Lawler 2005) enables an understanding of ethical leadership as a *temporal* process of *becoming* that takes place within specific *contexts*. This is a necessary addition to ethical leadership research, which, for its own good reasons, is generally attuned to understanding behaviour in terms of practical performance and outcomes (Brown et al. 2005).

Our focus on the narratives of aspirational ethical leaders fills a gap in the literature, as most (ethical) leadership studies to date are a-temporal (Shamir 2011), a-contextual (Lawler 2005) and do not take identity formation into account (Brown and Mitchell 2010). By examining discursive strategies we hope to advance the understanding of ethical leadership as a dynamic process, bringing it into the 'realm of everyday experiences' (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011, p. 1429), as this is where leaders grapple with the complexities and incoherencies of becoming ethical leaders. Based on Giddens (1984), we recognise the knowledgeability of human agents set within the enabling as well as constraining structures of their day-to-day lives. We perceive the leaders in our study, therefore, as active agents who make use of discursive strategies to construct ethical identity but they do so within the limitations imposed by their contexts.

In order to examine how business leaders narrate aspirational ethical leadership, we investigate processes of identity formation among ethnic Chinese business leaders in Indonesia who converted to Pentecostal–charismatic

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Christianity in the late 1990s. This denomination has been growing rapidly in Asia among middle class ethnic Chinese (Brazier 2006) and is characterised by expressive worship, subjective religious experiences, gifts of the spirit (prophecy, miracles, healing), and a language of practical spirituality (Burgess and van der Maas 2002). The spiritual rebirth of being 'born-again' means having left behind a 'sinful' past; investing in faith, through Bible study, evangelising, paying tithes, and charity, creates continual self-overcoming and results in personal success (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001, p. 7).

The religious conversion experiences of the ethnic Chinese business leaders make an interesting case for exploring how leadership, ethics and identity are narrated because of the sharp distinction made between 'before' and 'after'. The life-business histories collected during fieldwork in Yogyakarta in 2004 and 2007 show that the conversions were instigated by business and/or personal crises. According to Denzin (1989, pp. 33, 70), such epiphanies are 'moments of revelation in a person's life' that can 'alter the fundamental meaning structures'. Those converted narrate their business leadership and related values strongly in terms of an old (sinful) and new (born-again) personhood and they do so within a challenging, highly corrupt, business context. In order to show how these business leaders discursively deconstruct their 'old' identities and construct their 'new' aspirational identities as 'ethical' business leaders, we single out the story of Harry and specifically focus on the use of metaphor in articulating ethical identity. Metaphor is a transport vehicle (Chia 1996), with the capacity to mediate identity across time, a movement that can be metaphorised as a 'transit' through events of memory, attention and expectation (Ricoeur 1984a).

Thus, our paper makes three contributions. First, we enrich the literature on ethical leadership with a dynamic identity formation lens. We show that ethical leadership is a process, a becoming, performed in identity talk as the business leaders actively narrate aspirational identities. Second, we add an explicit contextual focus to this otherwise rather homogenising literature. We demonstrate, through the identity narratives of the business leaders that ethical leadership is a context-bound and situated claim vis-à-vis unethical practice. Third, based on our case, we propose a conceptual template for the study of aspirational ethical leadership. The template identifies processes of realisation and inspiration experienced by the business leaders, followed by significant shifts in understanding their ethical leadership.

The remainder of this paper explains our theoretical positioning and research approach, then illustrates and analyses the case of Harry, and culminates in a discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical Positioning

Traditionally, ethical leadership literature has had a strong focus on traits, behaviour and leader–follower relations, and effectiveness, which has recently been reinforced by increased reports on corporate scandals, and unethical behaviour at the top (Brown and Trevino 2006; Brown and Mitchell 2010; Harshman and Harshman 2008; Knights and O'Leary 2006). The oft-used definition of ethical leadership by Brown et al. (2005, p. 120) reflects this: 'the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making'. If the main focus is on the outcome of ethical leadership, such as the 'promotion' of ethical/good 'conduct' among employees, such a definition makes sense. Avey et al. (2011, p. 573) argue that the above definition presents a holistic approach since it 'includes both traits and behaviors of the leader' and 'behaviors that encourage follower ethical behavior', bringing together the moral person and moral manager aspects. However relevant, we contend that such a behaviour and practical performance-oriented focus cannot adequately capture the *agency* of the 'person' and 'manager' as an active author of his/her aspirational identity as an ethical leader embedded in *contexts* of ethical (or unethical) standards and norms.

Unfortunately, much of the (ethical) leadership literature is often rather a-contextual, thus 'homogenizing leadership' and stripping it 'away from any context' (Lawler 2005, pp. 221, 222). As Fairhurst (2009, p. 1610) argues, the context is essential in understanding how 'leadership is brought off' in the first place. At the same time, contextual factors are highly relevant as they interact closely with identity formation (Ybema et al. 2009). We suggest bringing in 'context', for instance a particular business 'culture'. The context, as our case will show, can produce challenging (unethical) circumstances for aspiring ethical leaders and consequently provide an extra layer of understanding of their formation.

Leaders' authoring (as active agents) of an ethical identity includes work on personal identity as self-understanding, as well as the identity presented to the world. Our data suggest a strong individual dimension, at the level where the leader struggles to make sense of himself/herself as an ethical leader. This is an important dimension to address since ethics is very much about who we are (Cunliffe 2009) and who we aspire to be. As such, ethics is neither simply an external construct nor an abstraction; it is also 'internal' (the person) and concerned with making ethical choices within specific contexts. This calls for turning our attention to leaders and their identity (ethics) work through studying their identity talk (Ybema et al.

2009). In other words, ethical leadership is about identity formation and incorporating an identity lens into ethical leadership studies is long overdue (see Carroll and Levy 2010; Day and Harrison 2007).

Identity formation as active authoring and ethical leadership as becoming suggests including the leader's own past, present and future. Most leadership studies, however, ignore such temporality. Our approach parallels that of Bluedorn and Jaussi (2008), who do not limit themselves to clock time but address event time (characterised by events). Leadership occurs over time and leaders influence the meaning of time; leadership cannot be understood without reference to it (Shamir 2011). Although the plea for more 'time-sensitive leadership theories' (Shamir 2011, p. 207) is important, we prefer an approach that views time as a socially constructed phenomenon; ethical leadership is not a linear development but a temporally iterative and dynamic one.

Individual managers (and, in our case, business leaders) employ discourse to constantly shape their changing and sometimes contradictory identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Whilst these self-narratives may 'integrate the individual's reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future, rendering a life-in-time sensible in terms of beginnings, middles and endings' (McAdams 1996, p. 298), they may also appear in the form of staccato narratives that punctuate episodic and discrete periods, constituting historical rupture (Zerubavel 2003). These temporal watersheds are retrospectively defined as chapters of a story that articulate and periodise discontinuous and distinct identities.

Given that identity transformations are primarily changes of meaning, language is an important means for effecting such transformations (Fiol 2002). Language crystallises the subjectivity of individuals, who 'must talk about themselves until they know themselves' (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 38). Discourse presents identity by drawing on (Taylor and Wetherell 1999) and transcending time, having the capacity to bridge different zones of life (Berger and Luckmann 1967). It is through language that the social construction of historical (dis)continuity is executed. Individuals are socialised into thinking of turning points that were not so self-evident at the time; the experience of 'turning' often happens over a longer phase (Zerubavel 2003). Language used thus is 'temporal *dis*continuity talk' that discursively constructs an old/new bifurcation (Ybema 2010, p. 481).

If we accept that ethical leadership can be seen as temporal identity construction, then understanding leaders' life stories can increase our awareness of their identities (Karp and Helgø 2009). Narrative constructs identity (Brown 2006), resting on a temporal structure (Sonsino 2005). Narrative identities are (re)constituted over time (Somers 1994), enabling temporal continuity (Giddens 1991) or, as shown above, discontinuity. Narrative is not a chronology but more like 'a stratified structure assembled like a pile of sheets of paper' that can be reordered (Ricoeur 1984b, p. 208). However, in reordering the sheets of paper, a new story is told, with a particular chronology. Narrative includes a clear beginning, middle and end, deploying chronology as an organising device that sequences events, although narrative differs from chronology in that it embodies ethics (Pentland 1999).

A coherent life story can produce a coherent and distinctive self-identity (Watson 2008), although it may not be possible (or desirable) to integrate diverse experiences. Identity-making not only involves forming but also sometimes revising constructions that, in reality, are only precariously coherent and distinct (Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

Aspirational identity narrates the individual as one who desires to be a particular kind of person and pursues that objective (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). Individuals discipline their identity work with preferred versions of the self. In an aspirational identity narrative, the individual is cast as a heroic figure whose life is punctuated by obstacles and tests on a perilous journey, in which success is both uncertain and deferred in a process of becoming (ibid.). The space of experience and the horizon of expectation 'mutually condition each other', the former gathering together, integrating and revising events, while the horizon of expectation unfolds and breaks open new perspectives, such that future expectation is inscribed in the present (Ricoeur 1984b, p. 209).

Narrating identity is, however, never ethically neutral but normative, evaluative and prescriptive; 'narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim – inseparable from its narration – to ethical justice' (Ricoeur 1984b, p. 249). Managers (and leaders) shape their individual identity by moulding a set of values (Watson 2001) and their identity work (re)authors their selves as moral beings (Clarke et al. 2009).

In summary, we claim that there is relevance in a renewed interest in 'the leader' as person; what Ruiz et al. (2011, p. 589) refer to as the focus of 'traditional' leadership research. We do so, however, in a way that is different from those earlier studies that focused on leadership style, by examining how business leaders narrate their ethical leadership identity in a particular business context. We contend that, with such an approach, we gain significant new insights into how leaders construct their leadership within (un)ethical contexts. It is through narratives and identity talk that we can attain an understanding of how leaders give meaning to their ethical leadership and how they relate to ethical dilemmas (Eubanks et al. 2012). Grounded in an interpretive epistemology, our approach is

appropriate for addressing what is meaningful to people in their particular contexts. Furthermore, 'there are relatively few empirical studies addressing in depth the significance of specific subjective processes of identity constructions in relation to leadership' (Sveningsson and Larsson 2006, p. 204; see also Toor and Ofori 2009).

Research Approach

The following narrative is part of an ongoing research project of the first author on the relationship between religion and business in Indonesia. The project collected life-business narratives of a group of middle-class ethnic Chinese owner-managers of small and medium-sized companies who have converted to Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity, from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds (Koning 2009, 2011). Pentecostal–charismatic Christians use the term 'conversion' even for those who were formerly of another Christian background, as they are seen as having become true Christians.

The narrative approach, in this research of 'life-business histories' (Dahles 2004), focusing on agency, explores difficult life transitions and questions of identity (Riessman 1993, pp. 4–5). The approach facilitates illustration of temporal dimensions, construction of meaning, and the subjective experiences of organisational members (Rhodes and Brown 2005b, pp. 177–178).

The research, engaged as it is with subjective processes of meaning-making, is ontologically constructivist and epistemologically interpretive; 'we are meaning-making creatures' and therefore we should 'address what is meaningful to people in the social situation' (Yanow 2006, p. 9). The research methods chosen represent this stance: life-business histories, combined with (participant) observations. These life-business histories share with the life story genre 'a concern with time in the life – of how it is lived over phases, careers, cycles, stages' (Plummer 2001, p. 39).

The first author conducted the interviews during two short periods of fieldwork in Yogyakarta in 2004 and 2007. Apart from interviewing business owners who converted, she frequented two Pentecostal–charismatic churches, observed and participated in Sunday worship, interviewed pastors and church staff on religious and church matters, was invited to join meetings of the 'Full Gospel Business Men Fellowship International' (which, although the name seems to imply so, does not exclude women) and, on occasion, joined social gatherings of the ethnic Chinese community. These broader research activities sensitised this researcher at a personal level through vivid experiences of the experiential dimensions of Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity and, at a research level, by 'seeing' how business, religious and private lives fuse. These experiences enriched the interview process, deepened the understanding of the religious and ethnic minority contexts (ethnic Chinese Christians in a predominantly Muslim and Malay setting), and supported data interpretation.

The life-business interviews were conducted (and tape-recorded with consent) in Indonesian and translated into English by the first author. Because of the life-story approach, most interviews were carried out over two separate meetings (in the offices of the business leaders), each of approximately 2 h duration. In total, some 13 life-business stories were assembled and all cover an exploration of life story (as ethnic Chinese, an often discriminated against minority, born and raised in Indonesia), business history (the leadership of the business over time) and religious careers (the conversion experience, retrospectively narrated, post-conversion).

Access to the ethnic Chinese community was gained in 2004 when the first author was introduced to several business owners through a Chinese Indonesian friend. Subsequent interviewees were approached via snowball sampling, approaching people in the charismatic churches the researcher visited, and through the Full Gospel group. Since the research is aimed at understanding how ethnic Chinese business leaders who have converted to Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity narrate their leadership, identity and ethics, the sampling was purposeful; interviewees were selected on the basis of ethnic Chinese self-identification, business-ownership and religion. The gender bias is due to the fact that in most businesses the men dominate the front office. Furthermore, the snowball method created a reference system in which one man referred to another.

In all cases, the researcher asked the interviewees whether they were willing to participate by recalling their journey to Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity and the history of their business. There was great enthusiasm to do so, which can be explained by Coleman's (2003) point that the retelling of conversion stories is a means for born-again Christians to reconvert the charismatic self.

Based on the experience of the first author of living, working and doing research regularly in Indonesia since 1991, rapport with the interviewees was quickly established. The fact that the researcher is female and European was compensated for by her familiarity with Indonesian culture and history, together with her ability to speak the language—which made it possible to do the interviews alone. The shared Christian background, although from a different denomination and practised in the past, enabled basic understandings of practices and subject matter. Additionally, the second author's previous charismatic Christian identity sensitised him to the case (whilst adding an 'outsider' perspective for the analysis, as he was not involved in data collection).

We acknowledge the danger of subjectivity in the representation and interpretation of the narratives; the danger of 'creating the persons we write about' (Denzin 1989, p. 82) and the 'myth of neutrality' (Rhodes and Brown 2005a, p. 477). Following our ontological and epistemological stance, we posit that the knowledge produced by the research is situated, contingent and partial because all knowledge is so considered (Taylor 2001), and that meaning making (of both the researcher and the researched) is subjective and plural, and the very act of interpretation is 'always personal, partial and dynamic' (Lieblich et al. 1998, p. 10).

However, the researcher must minimise subjective biases. Therefore, we have carefully scrutinised all the cases and constructed Table 1 to portray the patterns of key findings. Furthermore, the interviews left ample room for the interviewees to address matters that they considered important. Notwithstanding, we concur with Cant and Sharma (1998, quoted in Thornborrow and Brown 2009, p. 362) that 'writing up ethnography usually means writing oneself into the account to some degree'.

Following Riessman (1993), we have singled out narrative analysis because it allows asking why the stories are told the way that they are told. In this study, such an approach permits analysis of form and content. Since most narratives are lengthy and full of turns and details, the analysis consists of a systematic method of reduction (Riessman 1993, p. 43). For the life-business story of Harry, the reduction consists of focusing on his religious experiences, in tandem with private and business life. The case thus represents selected segments. Table 1 is similarly a reduction; its main purpose is to give insight into patterns that were discovered across the cases. Ultimately, the case study is also used to further theoretical thinking (Yin 2009) on the interactions between leadership, ethics and identity, culminating in a proposed conceptual template for the study of aspirational ethical leadership.

Our analysis of narrative as discursive resource and the way it filters experienced realities also has the methodological advantage of minimising 'the danger of portraying a particular identity as the "essence" of an individual or a collective' (Ybema et al. 2009, p. 304). Narrating identity avoids essentialisation, as it is a dynamic process of identity formation.

Within the subjectivity of the narrative approach, the value of the narratives is found foremost in analysing *how* the interviewees construct meaning, instead of creating the illusion that 'we have captured the "real" experiences of "real" people' (Denzin 1989, p. 82). Commensurate with this, we analyse the role of metaphor when interpreting the data.

In joining meanings together, metaphor is capable of 'articulating' identities. It can express the inexpressible (Ortony 1975) and therefore is especially suited to religiously inspired identities. Metaphor also constitutes and deepen values by expressing them in novel situations (Pondy 1983), making them salient to this research. Metaphor is a constitutive and transformative trope that can transfer the meaning-maker from one understanding to another (Waistell 2006) and uphold a tensive conception of reality (Ricoeur 1976). The trope 'sees as' and this split reference refigures time, so that narrating history is 'seeing as' (Ricoeur 1984b).

The edited life-business story of Harry is chosen because it eloquently represents the other stories. We mainly draw from Harry's narrative whilst also referring to table 1, which addresses the interviewees' epiphanies and their post-epiphany identities, in terms of religion and ethical leadership.

Identity Talk of Aspirational Ethical Leaders

In this section, we explore Harry's use of temporal talk and metaphor to narrate his identity as aspirational ethical leader. Characteristic of Harry's and the other interviewees' life-business stories is the centrality of the epiphany that sharply demarcates 'before' and 'after'. Therefore, we have reconstructed Harry's narration in three parts: his looking back on his pre-epiphany business life, relating his epiphany experience and narrating his post-epiphany leadership.

Harry's Pre-epiphany Business Life

Harry, 50 years old, married, with two children studying in Canada, is the owner–manager of a computer business that employs 22 staff. The business provides room to both a shop and staff offices. He started this business in the 1980s with a friend from college. Both are ethnic Chinese.

> The chance that I shall start a business with a non-Chinese is very small. This is because our sense of business is very different. If Chinese people make a profit, they save it, in order to invest again.

During childhood, Harry attended his parents' Protestant church. He explains that the more progressive Pentecostal–charismatic church better fits the business mentality of the ethnic Chinese.

> That's why many Pentecostal-charismatic churches find attraction among the ethnic Chinese community. I have been in the Protestant church from childhood onwards and nothing has changed there; the style is still the same, the theology is the same, while out

Table 1 Epiphanies, religious identity and ethical leadership

Name f/m = (fe)male	Business	Epiphany	Religious identity	Ethical leadership
Harry (m)	Computer sales and repair	Near bankruptcy; problems with business partner	'I am a tool of God'	Honesty. Praying at work
Ronald (m)	Building contractor	Near bankruptcy; corruption	'Business and religion have to become one'	Honesty: 'I don't want to play 'dirty' anymore; I want to be 'clean' in business conduct'. Praying every day
Otto (m)	Juice and soy production	None; wanted active worship	'If we trust in God he will take care of us'	Kindness: being a manager among the workforce. Praying at work
Alief (m)	Building supply store	Financial loss	'Without Jesus inside we cannot change; I am conducting my business for God'	Honesty 'if we join corruption this means we have no faith, if we have no faith we are never going to be saved'. Praying every day
Herman (m)	Printing firm	Debts and corruption	'All is in the hands of God, I give the day in the hands of God and whatever happens is how God has meant it to be'	Honesty. Praying every day.
Yunas (m)	Car tyres and appliances	Personal problems; illness daughter	'God guides me, God is always with me, whatever happens there is a good reason for it'	Compassion and empathy: Giving 'love' to the workers (help them if needed); being honest; pray every day
Go (m)	Publishing and printing house	Calling from God ('I was also a person with sins')	'Things Jesus does not want to happen don't happen'	Service: mission and service, teach people how to pray. Praying at work
David (m)	Consultant and bathroom retailing	Succession problems in the family business	'God shows us the way' (hearing the voice of God talking to him)	Empathy: being a more thoughtful manager
Sri (f)	Bathroom retailer	Follow children in their belief	Presence of God	Forgiveness: more at ease to co-manage the business with her son (and accept changes he makes)
Lili (f)	Medical doctor, private practice	Personal problems	'If we accept Jesus He can help us solve our problems; I feel Jesus is in my life'	Guidance: there is someone there helping me'. Praying every day
Rini (f)	Distributor of small goods	Problems in family	'God shows how to walk the right road; God points the right direction'	Guidance: 'Everything I do is inspired by the Lord'. Praying and serving others
Tomas (m)	Telecoms. and restaurant	Corruption	'Jesus never lies and Jesus never sleeps; Jesus is there to help with business problems'	Service: bring change, do Jesus' work, motivate others to let Jesus into their lives. Praying
Samsul (m)	Consultant	Career problems	'The logic of the Lord is better than the logic of humans'	Courage: 'Not joining corruption is a very idealistic attitude in Indonesia; we must compromise'

Source Koning fieldwork data (anonymous names), 2004 and 2007

> there something new is happening; an active style of worship and priests who actively talk about how the Bible relates to our daily lives. When the preacher said 'God is talking to you', that was something I had never heard before in my former church; it is progressive, exciting, and appeals to ethnic Chinese, even more so if a church starts an ambitious programme to build a house of worship that will host 10,000 people, or intends to start a Christian radio broadcast or television channel. This expresses a business soul, and Chinese people are people with business souls.

Harry narrates that his previous religion was stuck in the past. Although he had been a Protestant 'from childhood onwards', 'nothing has changed'. His comparative periodic perspective (Zerubavel 2003) is underscored by the use of repetition; before 'the style is still the same, the theology is the same' but now 'something new is happening'. He metaphorises the relationship between religion and leadership in terms of a 'business soul' that is possessed both by his religion and by the Chinese businessmen identifying with it (similar comments come from Ronald: 'business and religion have to become one'). This metaphor integrates identities related to leadership, ethics, religion and ethnicity, while suggesting that they all interact with each other. Harry's 'actual' turning point is closely related to his business problems in the 1990s.

> It was in the early 1990s that I was brought to the Pentecostal-charismatic church; it was at a time I was encountering severe business problems. One day someone approached me and said: 'Mr Harry, you are having problems.' I was surprised, how could this man know, I had not even told my wife about it? The man informed me that Jesus told him Mr Harry needed support and prayer. He ended up taking care of me for more than six months; he taught me how to pray and understand the Bible. From this experience of being guided, I felt the power of the Holy Spirit, which helped me to overcome the problems; in the end I was able to master the problems with the support of God.

What stands out is 'one day'; Harry sees this single event as a watershed, following which he felt that the Holy Spirit helped him to 'master the problems', a metaphor conveying a new era of divine power, providing ethical direction. In light of the epiphany, our respondent reconstitutes his past, authoring a strong demarcation with the present/future, thus constructing discontinuity of time (Zerubavel 2003).

This part of Harry's narrative conveys a leap from an old to a new personhood and it is within the latter that his leadership, ethics, religion and ethnicity fuse. But, as we will see below, this leap is part of an ongoing journey characterised by hurdles.

Harry's Epiphany and 'new' Insights

Harry relates that the culmination of his problems (and subsequent religious conversion) was the accusation of corruption that almost resulted in his business's demise.

> My business problems were really severe; I was on the verge of bankruptcy. I had supposedly illegally imported computers into Indonesia. These allegations were absolutely untrue. Without my goods to sell however, debt collectors soon visited me. I was scared and started to pray; I was 'told' to start collecting money from people who owed me, even though it was not yet their payback time. Although an embarrassing situation, I felt strong that this was the road Jesus wanted me to walk. On the night before the ultimatum I prayed again to God and I thanked him that He had shown me the way. Now it was up to Him. I went home. The next day I was waiting for a phone call from the bank telling me there was still a shortage but it turned out that my account had more than enough money. Everyone I called had paid more than I asked for. Yes, the Lord is really very close to us.

Metaphor enables new insights (Morgan 1993) and this is noticeable when Harry narrates his aspirational ethical leadership with the metaphor of a path: God told him to collect his debts early and he explains this with the metaphor 'the road Jesus wanted me to walk'. Other interviewees use similar metaphors of divine leadership and direction; God points 'the way' to David, 'guides' Yunas, and shows 'the right road' and 'right direction' to Rini. It is through moments of severe business problems that Harry started to experience such direction, particularly in a (religious) context that understood his business leadership.

> God blessed me, it was not my faith that helped me, in fact it was the power of the Lord; God conducted a miracle. Before, when I was in trouble I would go to church and meet teachers and civil servants in my Bible-study groups. But they did not understand my problems; they do not understand my world. If I wanted to discuss problems of bribery they would say things like 'that's for God'. So I was not able to solve these problems via my religion. But then I met with people of the Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship who are also in business and gave testimonies of how their faith helped them in overcoming business problems. I liked these testimonies. I thought 'yes,

> this is my place'. In Full Gospel we discuss business but also issues that concern us as head of the family, as husbands, as fathers.

Harry's language punctuates distinct periods (Zerubavel 2003); whereas before, Harry was unable to solve problems such as bribery through his religion, it was through *practical* examples, testimonies shared by the Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship, whose members are also in business, that Harry began to understand how faith helps to overcome business problems. It was this shared identity ('yes, this is my place') that enabled Harry to relate business to ethical issues concerning his multiple identities as father, husband and leader. Related to this, another realisation is disclosed:

> I used to separate business and religion. The business practice is very contrasting with the Word of God. For me, Monday till Saturday was business time, Sunday I went to church. But separated. Now I know this is the wrong way. But it is still difficult to work according to the Word of God. Most business people focus on business results; these will protect the future of the family. It is only when we believe the business is in the hands of God that we are on the right track. The business results are all ownership of God. In that way, I am able to take care of my family.

Prior to the epiphany, Harry experienced business and religion as separate, partly owing to a lack of support from the religion and partly because he himself 'used to separate business and religion'. Post-epiphany, they fused and infused each other. For Harry, the 'location' of religion changes from external to internal; it becomes something intrinsic to him and thus part of his leadership identity. In the same vein, there are claims from Alief that 'without Jesus inside we cannot change; I am conducting my business for God'; from Lili, 'if we accept Jesus he can help us solve our problems; I feel Jesus is in my life'; from Rini, 'everything I do is inspired by the Lord'; and from Tomas, 'Jesus is there to help with business problems'. Religion is part of both sides of their lives, faith and leadership, but the epiphany makes it more deeply meaningful, suggesting ethical certification, a recognition of ethical identity.

However, Harry's exploration is not over when he collapses together his religious and business identities, rather it is in fusing these identities that ethical dilemmas come into sharper focus; 'it is still difficult to work according to the Word of God'.

Harry's Post-epiphany Business Leadership

Post-epiphany, Harry questioningly explores his ethical leadership. His identity talk helps him understand how to give meaning to his leadership and grapple with associated ethical dilemmas. It becomes evident, however, that this is an ongoing quest.

> For some positions I prefer a co-Christian because I want to be able to pray with the manager in case we have problems. I cannot do this with someone of a different religion. Every decision has to be based in God; we have to be able to allow God to express His desire to us. It is all about us giving our whole being to God. Every moment of the day I talk with God. Praying is talking with God. I consult with God everyday, everyday I am in contact with God. Everybody can do this. If I have problems I ask God's help about how to solve this. The fate of my business is in the hands of God, I am just a tool of God.

Metaphors support the conceptualisation of experience whilst also facilitating understanding through concretising ideas (Lakoff 1987), helping to relate the divine to business practice in Pentecostal–charismatic Christianity. Thus, God becomes a consultant (as Lili comments; 'there is someone there helping me'). Not for Harry the endless search for a mysterious God; quite the opposite, he is in daily divine contact. So easy and accessible is this religious hotline that 'everybody can do this'. Divine leadership is constructed and metaphorised in terms of God as business owner ('the business results are all ownership of God'), who handles the business ('the hands of God'), while Harry is 'just a tool of God'. In that image, Harry also reconsiders the leadership of his business.

> Management asks for strict regulation. There have to be clear tasks; people have to know what their responsibilities are. I give instructions but then it is in the hands of the workers. I do as with my children – I give them instructions, you are my child, I am your father, you do as I say – so that they know the power is in the hands of the father and they have to follow my authority; this is needed. It is learning by doing but with setting out the rules first. I feel that my relation with the workforce is like father to child, I need to give them the good examples but tolerance is needed. It is about regulations but we have to be creative.

For Harry, personhood and leadership become one when he offers his whole being to God. Given this holistic understanding, we observe an interactive process between the components of Harry's identity. His leadership, no doubt reflecting the divine direction he himself receives, is one of 'strict regulation' so that his followers are aware of their responsibilities. He leads his staff in the fatherly authoritative way that he leads his children. The 'head of the family' metaphor merges Harry's familial, religious

and business leader identities when he compares the instructions he gives to his children to those he gives his staff. In both cases, 'power is in the hands of the father', just as it is in his Heavenly Father's hands (here we are making a theological assumption). With the Pentecostal identity comes God's powerful leadership, which Harry role-models and imparts to his followers; like his God, who provides ethical certification, he gives instructions 'but then it is *in the hands of* the workers'. Harry does warn, however, that the road of God is not an easy one.

> Based on our faith we have to stay away from corruption. But this is Indonesia; even if we try to, sometimes we are helpless. How can we walk in the middle of this darkness so that it becomes more lightened? What I try to do is to talk to people, to discuss these matters. I will pray with them. We business people are not wrong for seeking a business profit, but if this becomes our main focus we will be disappointed. Although we believe in God and follow our faith, this does not mean that we immediately are good Christians; maybe we will never realise this. It takes a long time. But we hope that if we do business with other Christian people it will be different, we hope they are perfect. But they are not.

Harry encounters something to be overcome within his 'space of experience', a space that evokes different possible paths (Ricoeur 1984b), metaphorised by Harry as 'how can we walk in the middle of this darkness so that it becomes more lightened?' Bribery is his hardest problem and he struggles with it, using this trope of light/dark to indicate that he is in a difficult position in trying to resolve the conflict between business and ethics, that there is nevertheless a middle way through, and all that is needed is to cast divine light on the problem. Similarly, Samsul experiences ethical struggle; 'not joining corruption is a very idealistic attitude in Indonesia; we must compromise' and Alief states; 'if we join corruption this means we have no faith, if we have no faith we are never going to be saved.' It is an ongoing struggle of ethical purification, most clearly expressed by Ronald when he says 'I want to be clean in business conduct.' Metaphor thus 'integrates multiple meanings to produce an intelligible whole from miscellaneous perspectives' (Waistell 2009, p. 79).

Harry crafts his identity as an ethical leader—with his new-found faith, he must avoid corruption—but this is a continuous crafting of an unfinished work. Harry's aspirational identity is cast as a heroic figure, who is tested on a perilous journey (Thornborrow and Brown 2009) that is metaphorised as walking from darkness into light. It is an incomplete, perhaps unrealisable, long journey in which he follows his faith but is not yet a good Christian. Doing business with those with whom he shares identity, other Christians, is an attempt to resolve ethical problems, but this aspiration is also disappointed, finding that they too are imperfect.

In summary, Harry's narrative portrays a struggle in making sense of his leadership. His epiphany supported, guided and empowered him to overcome his problems. Notwithstanding the pivotal role of this epiphany, Harry's is a continuing sense-making process. His identity talk is neither completed with the epiphany nor is it just an internal monologue but a continuing debate with his Fellowship and his God. It is a journey of aspiring ethical leadership in which we can detect divine direction, ethical purification struggles, and features of ethical certification.

Nonetheless, to what extent did Harry actually experience a transformative epiphany; indeed, was there an element of satisficing between religious/ethical demands? This variant of Christianity does not appear to critique—and may even legitimise—materialism, consumerism and capitalism. Harry identifies with a religion that endorses money-making, metaphorising it as 'my place'. Arguably, the epiphany might have certificated and legitimised Harry's previous business ethics, prior to his epiphany, and therefore his new identity might not have been entirely discontinuous.

Discussion

The religious conversion of the ethnic Chinese business leaders in our study instigates a specific kind of identity work. Their identity and ethics-based faith (with Jesus identified as moral leader) creates a strong ideological grip and influence on their identities and aspirational ethics—but how does it do so? Our study reveals the following discursive strategies.

First, interpretation across time allows these leaders to label and enclose old identities and unethical practices within a space clearly demarcated as pre-epiphany, in contrast to a post-epiphany period with born-again identities (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Zerubavel 2003). Their retrospective narration and chant-like repetition of assertions concerning the relationship between faith and business, salient in the corrupt business context, serves to bring the two together and defines their businesses (and they themselves as business leaders) as guided by their religion. Religious metaphors (such as 'the way') transfer their meanings outside the Bible, when our interviewees draw on them to make sense of their identities in a challenging environment. These recontextualised metaphors enable the leaders to relate their overall story-line: the divine 'master' leads their 'way' so that they become 'tools of God', walking in a new direction from darkness into light. Their businesses are now in the 'hands of God' so that they are 'clean' (as in baptism) and possessed of a 'business soul'.

Second, implicitly intertextualised links with Biblical narrative (such as St. Paul's epiphany) inform identity construction, effectively remaking man in the image of God. The stories mirror the Damascene epiphany of Saul, who thereafter assumed a new religious identity as St. Paul, highlighting how epiphany can change identity. The Saint's narrative operates as the paradigm for subsequent Christian epiphanies, which are often productive of discontinuous ethical identities, pre- and post-epiphany.

Third, the ongoing interweaving and mutual reinforcement of identities (leadership, ethical, religious and familial) legitimises and integrates the different strands of identity (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). God not only guides the business leaders, they can also become practitioners of Divine leadership themselves.

These discursive strategies show that leaders construct their identities over time and in context, and they do so by drawing on their biographical past, present and future. Narration orders and categorises time periods, effecting a spiritual reformation of identities. Metaphor is deployed in constructing both previous and aspirational identities by emphasising pre- and post-epiphany periods. Epiphany, understood as 'making manifest', has metaphoric effects—transporting leaders from one self-understanding to another.

Hence, it is through discursive strategies that the business leaders narrate their ethical standpoints (Ricoeur 1984b), mould their values (Watson 2001), and re-author themselves as moral beings (Clarke et al. 2009), so that their identities are the culmination of their values (Day and Harrison 2007). This is necessarily an incomplete and ongoing project. The temporal manipulation evident in our study addresses a gap in the ethical leadership literature. Little attention has been given to the explicit incorporation of time as a construct in understanding leadership (Day and Harrison 2007; Shamir 2011) or to perceive ethical leadership as a process of identity formation (Carroll and Levy 2010).

Our research thus demonstrates how leaders exercise agency, developing and presenting their identities in circumstances of radically transformative experiences, in the context of ethically challenging structures. We can generalise theoretically to other contexts of ethical leadership in terms of the interaction of agency and structure in leadership identity work (Fairhurst 2009; Lawler 2005; Ybema et al. 2009). The interplay between agency and structure in our case not only sensitises an understanding of leadership as part of the everyday world but also warns us to be careful about homogenising and essentialising (ethical) leadership.

Watson (2009, p. 426) argued that the human individual should be researched as a 'whole person'; commensurate with this is our analysis of a range of Pentecostal–charismatics, whose religious epiphanies imbued their identities as aspirational ethical business leaders (and as family members). Our approach parallels that of Watson (2009) insofar as we have examined how external aspects of identities are internalised in identity work, portraying both active 'agents' who create narratives, but within the limitations imposed by religion, business and society. Our participants narrated their *aspirational* identities, such that 'the recognition of subjectively construed identities as narrativized permits an appreciation of individuals as sophisticatedly agentic, while recognizing that their "choices" are made within frameworks of disciplinary power which both enable and restrict their scope for discursive manoeuvre' (Thornborrow and Brown 2009, p. 355).

Arguably, leadership, and in our case aspirational ethical leadership, is also relational (Cunliffe 2009, p. 97). While our study focuses on temporal construction of aspirational ethical leadership identity, such an identity is still formed in the context of relationships with others, through the Full Gospel meetings, charity activities, and working with Christian managers. In Christianity, the relational process of identity formation includes the Divine, which is also constitutive of human relationships. The Christian view is that all people are made in the image of, and in relationship with, God—and they all have free will to work for the good in business, in relationships with others (Alford 2010).

In summary, we generate a conceptual template that may be applicable to leaders beyond our study (Fig. 1).

The business leaders in this study experienced a life-changing epiphany, although other leaders can undergo comparable processes of realisation and inspiration, followed by significant shifts in understanding. Aspirational identity marks a degree of discontinuity with the past, although there is also some degree of continuity in leaders' ethical struggle with business problems. With aspiration comes direction; in our study, for example, God points 'the way' and 'the right road' and 'right direction'. Being born-again offers recognition and certification of our business leaders as ethical leaders. Prayer offers them a continuing process of purification, so that they move away from 'dirty' corruption to 'clean' business, although this is a perpetual struggle between agency and context. The whole process

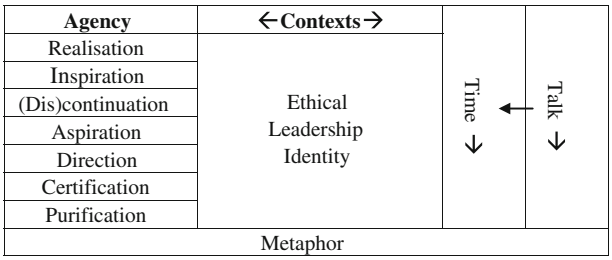

Fig. 1 Conceptual template of aspirational ethical leadership

takes place over time, as does the identity talk that narrates it, whilst also manipulating time, distancing a former identity while looking forward to 'something new' and 'exciting'.

Ethical leadership research is often concerned with behaviour, in terms of leader (and follower) performance, addressing effectiveness in organisations. It presents ethical leadership as an abstraction while our research shows that a more comprehensive account emerges by focusing both on ethical leaders' discursive practices that construct aspirational identities and on the wider context in which leaders operate.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored narrations of aspirational ethical leadership identities and subsequently developed a conceptual template to guide future research. Supported by recent theorising on discursive, dynamic, aspirational and temporal identity and recent social constructionist leadership research, we have shown that *ethical leadership* is particularly about *becoming* in *context*.

We thus contribute to the literature first of all, a perspective of ethical leadership as a process, a becoming, performed in identity talk as the business leaders narrate aspirational identities as ethical leaders, and second, we add an explicit contextual focus to the otherwise rather homogenising ethical leadership literature. We demonstrate, through the identity narratives of the business leaders, that ethical leadership is a context-bound and situated claim vis-à-vis unethical practice. Furthermore, the literature so far shows very little empirical substantiation of subjective processes of leadership identity constructions, something our paper does show in detail.

Our study of converted ethnic Chinese business leaders in Indonesia is insightful because the religious experiences of these leaders invite them to rethink and partly re-author their ethics, leaderships and identities. This sensitises us to perceive ethical leadership *not* as an 'either-or' *but* as a non-dual synthesis; ethical leadership can be, and often is experienced as, both individual *and* relational, past, present *and* future, continuous *and* discontinuous, internal *and* external, and ethical *and* unethical. This constitutes our third contribution to ethical leadership research, translated into our conceptual template, as follows.

Identity formation in aspirational ethical leadership is an interaction between contexts and transformative agentic processes of realisation, inspiring the constitution of a new identity, discontinuous with what went before (although more subtly retaining previous aspects of the 'former' identity). This new self-understanding galvanises further aspiration towards ethical leadership, characterised by a clearer direction for the leaders and purification of their practices. Such discursive positioning offers ethical certification; a recognition of ethical identity. Certification may, however, involve justification and legitimation of previous business ethics instead of becoming more ethical. The identity talk takes place over time and is context-bound.

Indubitably, our research also has its limitations. Followers may not concur with leaders' claims of leadership, ethics and identity. In fact, the strong salience of the leader's religious identity might alienate atheist staff or those of other faiths and deny their personal ethical systems. Whereas leadership is contingent upon leaders being perceived to be prototypical of a social identity shared with followers (Reicher et al. 2005), we have not been able to explore the perceptions of followers. This requires further research. The narrative approach, employed in our analysis of leadership identity, is suitable for exploring followers' views; such 'pluralization' can add to our understanding of organisations as complex and multi-voiced realms (Rhodes and Brown 2005b, p. 178).

This leads us to the practical implications of our research. According to King (2008), the work environment is increasingly religiously diverse. Our paper provides some insights into religious identities, which are so far neglected in the management field (ibid.), but what are the implications for leadership practice in the context of ethics and identities? If ethical leadership identity must be dynamically authored with the participation of followers, this can be problematic if followers do not share their leader's religion, leaving a potential divide between their respective ethics/identities. The problem is compounded if leaders experience (partly) discontinuous identities; how can followers relate to such discontinuity? We suggest that shared metaphors can mediate connections between the ethics/identities of leaders and followers and possibly unite leaders and followers of different faiths—and those of no faith. Metaphors have the capacity to bridge different zones of life (Berger and Luckmann 1967) and connect identities. We recommend that future research should examine how effectively metaphors communicate the different ethics/identities of organisational members.

Finally, we hope that our conceptual template invites research of other leaders who have undergone similar ethical turning points in their careers as well as in different contextual settings. As such, the template is particularly aimed at enticing an ethical leadership research agenda that understands leadership, ethics and identity as intrinsically dynamic and connected, and that advocates research on ethical leadership in other parts of the world, among leaders at different stages in their careers, and with different frames of reference. Hopefully this will lead to more diversified and nuanced understandings of what it means to aspire to be an ethical leader.

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